Methodological Perspectives

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Published in

The Bridge of Quiescence: Experiencing Buddhist Meditation (Open Court, 1998)

The Study of Consciousness and of Buddhist Meditation

This present work is motivated by an interest in Buddhist contemplative practices as a means to gaining greater understanding of the mind, and particularly the nature of consciousness. For people brought up and educated in America and Europe, it would be quite reasonable to look first to modern Western science for answers to questions about this subject; and indeed, in recent years there has been a surge of scientific interest in a wide array of issues surrounding consciousness. One assumption underlying this work is that Indo-Tibetan Buddhist literature on the cultivation of sustained, voluntary attention may contribute to our modern understanding of the nature and potentials of attention, introspection, and consciousness. Despite four hundred years of expanding knowledge in the fields of the physical sciences, life sciences, and cognitive sciences, there is presently no scientific or philosophical consensus concerning the origins, nature, causal efficacy, or fate of consciousness. Scientists have yet to discover the manner in which consciousness arises, either in primitive organisms or in humans. The general assumption is that consciousness arises as an emergent property of matter and energy, but scientists do not yet know what it is about certain configurations of matter and energy that enable them to produce consciousness. Thus, the origins of consciousness remain a mystery.

The nature of consciousness also eludes the natural sciences. There are no scientific means of detecting the presence or absence of consciousness, either in primitive organisms, such as a hydra, or in a developing human fetus. If such scientific knowledge were available, there would be much more clarity and less dogma, for example, in the ongoing debates about abortion. Moreover, there is no consensus among cognitive scientists as to whether consciousness is a state, a content, a process, or a system. Is it *identical* to certain functions of the nervous system, or is it a distinct phenomenon that is *produced* by certain—as yet unidentified—neurological processes? If it is in fact a natural phenomenon distinct from the brain, what are its own unique characteristics? The nature of consciousness remains an open question.

Subjective experience clearly indicates that states of consciousness causally influence other mental and physical processes, as evidenced by the placebo effect, and the influences of both unintentional and intentional mental processes, such as the opening of capillaries in the face as a result of embarrassment, and the intentional movements of the body. This very assertion, however, is held suspect in contemporary cognitive science, which tends to attribute all such causal efficacy to brain functions alone. If subjectively experienced conscious states do in fact have causal efficacy, the mechanisms of their influence remain unknown to modern science. Even without accepting Cartesian dualism regarding the body and mind, it seems that some scientific explanation should be sought to account for the fact that our mental states at least *seem* to influence the body and mind; but the nature of that causal efficacy remains a mystery.

Finally, although there is widespread scientific consensus that consciousness disappears at death, this is a necessary implication of the premise that consciousness is an emergent property of a properly functioning nervous

system. But given our lack of scientific knowledge about the origins and nature of consciousness, both in terms of evolution and human embryology, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that we are equally ignorant about the fate of consciousness at death.

In short, although modern science is presently ignorant of the origins, nature, causal efficacy, and fate of consciousness, the extent of our ignorance about consciousness is often overlooked. This ignorance is, as it were, a retinal "blind spot" in the scientific view of the world: it is a deficit in our vision of reality, a deficit of which our civilization seems largely unaware. Thus, volumes on cosmogony, evolution, embryology, and psychology are written with hardly a mention of consciousness; and when it is addressed, it tends to be presented not in terms of its own distinctive, experiential qualities, but in terms of other phenomena with which scientists are well familiar, such as computer systems[1], brain functions[2], and even quantum mechanics[3]. Although the nature of consciousness was long overlooked in Western science, over roughly the past ten years there has been a rapid surge of interest in this subject not only in the field of cognitive science, but in the life sciences and physical sciences as well. Moreover, a growing number of these scientists are demonstrating an unprecedented openness to insights from the world's contemplative traditions, of both the East and the West.[4]

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[1]Howard Gardner expresses the view of many contemporary cognitive scientists when he comments that the computer model is "central to any understanding of the human mind." Howard Gardner, *The Mind's New Science* (New York: Basic Books, 1985) p. 6.

[2]Cf. F. H. C. Crick, *The Astonishing Hypothesis--The Scientific Search for the Soul* (London: Simon and Schuster, 1994).

[3]Cf. Roger Penrose, *Shadows of the Mind--A Search for the Missing Science of Consciousness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); Bernard Baars, "Roger Penrose and the Quest for the Quantum Soul," *Journal of Consciousness Studies: controversies in science & the humanities*. **1**, 2 (1994) pp. 261-3; Stuart Hameroff, "Quantum Coherence in Microtubules: A Neural Basis for Emergent Consciousness?" *Journal of Consciousness Studies* **1**, 1 (1994) pp. 91-118.

[4]I would especially draw the reader's attention to the new *Journal of Consciousness Studies: controversies in science & the humanities: an international multi-disciplinary journal*, which provides a forum for a broad range of views concerning this subject.

Although there is certainly a comparable diversity of speculative theories of consciousness among Eastern philosophers and theologians, there are also many phenomenological accounts reported by contemplatives on the basis of their own personal experience. The Indo-Tibetan Buddhist contemplative tradition has produced an especially rich body of such literature. Not only does it give accounts of the origins, nature, causal efficacy, and fate of consciousness, it also provides specific instructions on ways of testing these theories experientially. While Western cognitive science has largely dismissed introspection as a means of exploring conscious states, the Buddhist tradition not only uses it, but explains in detail techniques for making this a more reliable and penetrating mode of observation. In particular, it asserts that the qualities of attentional stability and clarity are indispensable keys to the introspective exploration of conscious states. To take a modern analog, if one wishes to observe a specimen under an optical microscope, one should first see that this instrument is firmly mounted and that its lenses are clean and polished to ensure high resolution.

The very notion of taking from Buddhism theories of consciousness and techniques for developing sustained, voluntary attention and presenting them as possibly true and useful runs against much of the grain of the Western academic study of Buddhism. One reason for this is that Buddhism is widely regarded as a religion, and such theories and practices are simply components of the doctrine and rituals of that religion. Thus, the only acceptable way to present these topics is to report them as elements of the Buddhist tradition; they are not to be submitted as descriptions of the actual nature of consciousness or as means of actually refining one's introspective faculties.[5] In the words of William Christian,

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[5]William A. Christian , *Oppositions of Religious Doctrines: A Study in the Logic of Dialogue among Religions* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1972) p. 24.

a distinguished philosopher of religion, as long as one is reporting on a religion, speakers can be informative "when they define or explain doctrines of their traditions, but not when they are asserting them."[6] Although scientists are obviously granted the right to assert the truth of their theories, a different standard is required for proponents of religion, for "the central doctrines of the major traditions are not scientific theories, that is to say exact formulations of uniformities said to hold in the apparent world, or explanations and predictions derived from these laws of nature."[7]

What are we to make, then, of Buddhist contemplatives' exact, formulations of uniformities said to hold true of states of consciousness and the means they describe for testing those theories in experience? William Christian comments:

> Though conceivably a religious tradition might include among its subsidiary doctrines some scientific claim (or something purporting to be a scientific claim), oppositions of such doctrines drawn from different religions are even less likely than opposed historical claims...[8]

Some reasons for this are that

> (i) all the major religions took shape in pre-scientific eras and (ii) when they have had to assimilate modern science they have learned (more or less, sometimes by bitter experience) how to avoid introducing scientific theories into their doctrinal schemes. But as

[6]Ibid., p. 88.
[7]Ibid., p. 30.
[8]Ibid.

> with historical claims the main reason is that religious doctrines deal with a different range of problems than scientific theories do...[9]

This statement certainly holds true with regard to many problems that clearly fall within the separate domains of theology or natural science, but these two disciplines are bound for a head-on collision when it comes to the nature of consciousness; for they both have a great stake in their doctrines, and neither is inclined to sacrifice its beliefs to the other. Although it is obviously true that Buddhism has taken shape in pre-scientific eras, the past four hundred years of natural science have produced no consensus concerning the fundamental issues around consciousness. Buddhism raises real questions concerning the origins, nature, causal efficacy, and fate of consciousness; and it suggests means of enhancing attentional stability and clarity, and of then using these abilities in the introspective examination of conscious states to pursue the fundamental concerning consciousness itself. Its theoretical and practical hypotheses are either true or false, and if they can be tested in part by modern scientific methods, this can only be seen as an advantage by Buddhists who are genuinely concerned with the nature and means of exploring consciousness.

William Christian does allow for one exception to his guidelines for making religious statements: in the course of supporting them, adherents of a religion may make informative utterances about their own experiences "if they are relevant."[10] Thus, this leaves open the possibility that contemplatives, Buddhist or otherwise, may speak informatively of their own experiences; and such reports may be taken seriously by others.

[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid., pp. 88-89.

Approaches to the Study of Buddhist Meditation

On the whole, the Western academic study of Buddhism has adhered to the guidelines laid out by William Christian, and its treatment of Indo-Tibetan Buddhist techniques for developing sustained, voluntary attention is no exception. For example, in his book *Calming the Mind and Discerning the Real: Buddhist Meditation and the Middle View*[11], Alex Wayman has produced an English translation of Tsongkhapa's most extensive discussion of meditative quiescence. The introduction, translation and extensive annotations are standard examples of the philological, historical, text-critical model of Buddhology. As C. W. Huntington points out, this model "is accorded the greatest prestige—due, no doubt, to its close association with what is taken to be the scientific method—but it is also subject to frequent criticism on the grounds that it has become altogether too abstract and sterile in its refusal to give sustained attention to the problem of meaning."[12]

While this model may rightly be called *scientific* with respect to the *texts* under investigation, it is purely *scholastic* in that it ignores whatever *experiential basis* may underlie those texts. Moreover, the truth or falsity of the theoretical and practical assertions of the texts is never even addressed. For instance, in his introduction Wayman gives a summary of various paranormal abilities that are said to be achievable once one has attained quiescence. These include flying, physically moving through solid objects, the psychic manipulation of matter, the psychic creation of physical illusions, recollections of previous lives,

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[11]Alex Wayman, *Calming the Mind and Discerning the Real: Buddhist Meditation and the Middle View* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978).
[12]C. W. Huntington, *The Emptiness of Emptiness: An Introduction to Early Indian Mā dhyamika.* with Geshé Namgyal Wangchen (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989) pp. 6-7.

clairaudience, and clairvoyance.[13] To most modern Western readers, all such claims must appear preposterous, but nowhere does he offer an evaluative comment whatsoever. Do Buddhists take these claims seriously? Are there accounts of people actually achieving any of these abilities? Is it possible to attain quiescence, which is said to be an indispensable prerequisite to those paranormal abilities? Is it possible to attain any of the nine attentional states leading up to the achievement of quiescence? None of these issues are even raised by Wayman, which may be seen as an indication of his refusal to look beyond the meaning of the words to the philosophical, scientific, and religious import of the text.[14]

This way of treating literature from non-Western cultures conforms well with the current intellectual orthodoxy in the Western academic disciplines of philosophy, anthropology, sociology, and history of religion, in which cultural relativism and deconstruction are very much in vogue. Huntington, for instance, approvingly cites Gadamer's claim that

> The text that is understood historically is forced to abandon its claim that it is uttering something true. We think we understand when we see the past from a historical perspective, i.e. place ourselves in the historical situation and seek to reconstruct the historical horizon. In fact, however, we have given up the claim to

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[13]Alex Wayman, *Calming the Mind and Discerning the Real: Buddhist Meditation and the Middle View*, pp. 38-43.

[14]For further discussion of Wayman's book, see Geshe Sopa, "Some Comments on Tsong kha pa's *Lam rim chen mo* and Professor Wayman's *Calming the Mind and Discerning the Real*" and "Geshe Sopa Replies to Alex Wayman" in *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, 3 (1980) pp. 68-92 and 98-100; Alex Wayman, "Alex Wayman Replies to Geshe Sopa" in *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 3 (1980) pp. 93-97; Alex Wayman, "Introduction to Tsoṅ kha pa's Lam rim chen mo". *Phi Theta Annual*, Vol. 3 (Berkeley, 1952) pp. 51-82; Robert Kritzer, "Review of Alex Wayman, *Calming the Mind and Discerning the Real*: Buddhist Meditation and the Middle View" in *Philosophy East and West* 31 (1981) pp. 380-382. Also note Elizabeth Napper, *Dependent-Arising and Emptiness* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1989) pp. 441-473, for her comments on Wayman's translation of the insight section of Tsongkhapa's *Lam rim chen mo*.

> find, in the past, any truth valid and intelligible for ourselves. Thus this acknowledgment of the otherness of the other, which makes him the object of objective knowledge, involves the fundamental suspension of his claim to truth.[15]

In describing his methodology for his introduction, translation, and annotations to Candrakīrti's classic *Madhyamakāvatāra*, Huntington comments that his own approach takes for granted the insights of Gadamer's concept of effective history.[16] The frequently noted limitation of Gadamer's historical treatment of texts, however, is that his own works are written in "disappearing ink": that is, as soon as his hermeneutical criteria are applied by others to his writings, his own texts are forced to abandon their claim to utter anything that is true. On the other hand, if advocates of his viewpoint wish to claim a privileged perspective, superior to and unlike all others, they must stand at the end of a long line of earlier proponents of all manner of religious, philosophical, and scientific theories who make the same claim.

In a refreshing departure from this "self-erasing" methodology, Paul Griffiths suggests that, contrary to the assumptions of our contemporary intellectual climate, rational discourse is a phenomenon which operates by recognizably similar rules and with effectively identical goals cross-culturally, and is thus a tool available in a relatively straightforward manner for cross-cultural communication and assessment. In his learned volume *On Being Mindless: Buddhist Meditation And The Mind-Body Problem*" he uses as his working hypothesis the theory that "philosophy is a trans-cultural human activity, which

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[15]H. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* . Garrett Barden & John Cumming, trans. (New York. Reprint, 1988) p. 270. Cited in C. W. Huntington, *The Emptiness of Emptiness: An Introduction to Early Indian Mādhyamika*, p. 13.

[16]C. W. Huntington, *The Emptiness of Emptiness: An Introduction to Early Indian Mādhyamika*, p. 13.

in all essentials operates within the same conventions and by the same norms in all cultures."[17] Whether or not this large claim can be accepted without qualifying it in important respects, Griffiths rightly criticizes Western Buddhologists who refuse to take Buddhist thought seriously; and he comments, "We do the tradition a disservice if we refuse to move beyond the exegetical mode of academic discourse to the normative, the judgmental."[18]

Among the wide variety of Indian Buddhist literature on meditation—ranging from highly experiential to highly scholastic treatments—Griffiths focuses on systematic philosophical texts of Indian scholastic Buddhism, and treats them as "large-scale and sophisticated conceptual systems."[19] While he acknowledges that the "results of meditative practice inform the philosophical views of practicing Buddhists with new ways in which the philosophical system can be modified and developed," in terms of his own methodology, he refuses to address whether or not there actually are or were virtuoso practitioners who claim to be able to enter the meditative state called "the attainment of cessation,[20]" which is the major topic of his work.[21] Moreover, this approach may easily give rise to the impression that Buddhists meditate in order to devise sophisticated conceptual systems about meditation. According to the Buddhist contemplative tradition, however, the reverse holds true: conceptual systems about meditation are designed to guide contemplatives to states of experience that transcend all conceptual systems. In effect, Griffiths treats the topic of Buddhist meditation as if it is a dead (or never even living) tradition entombed in ancient books, a methodology long familiar to Western

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[17]Paul J. Griffiths, *On Being Mindless: Buddhist Meditation And The Mind-Body Problem* (La Salle: Open Court, 1986) p. xvii.
[18]Ibid., p. xix.
[19]Ibid., p. xx.
[20]'gog pa'i snyoms par 'jug pa, nirodhasamāpatti
[21]Ibid., p. 5.

Buddhologists at least since the Victorian era, in which the modern "scientific" study of Buddhism began.[22] This approach may be just as much a disservice to the tradition as a purely exegetical mode of academic discourse.

On the basis of his erudite, text-critical analysis of the attainment of cessation, Griffiths concludes that this meditative state is analogous to "some kind of profound cataleptic trance, the kind of condition manifested by some psychotic patients and by long-term coma patients."[23] If this is in fact the case, what is the appeal of this soteriological goal for practicing Buddhists? If this is regarded as a temporary state of mindlessness, why would Buddhist contemplatives subject themselves to the arduous, sustained mental discipline culminating in a state that could much more swiftly and straightforwardly be achieved by means of a well-aimed blow to the head with a heavy object? On the other hand, if this is regarded as a salvific state that lasts for eternity, it is hard to imagine a more impoverished notion of salvation than this, which Griffiths has attributed to the Buddhist tradition. Are there any Buddhist contemplatives today who actually aspire to such a goal? If one feels that the texts compel one to draw this conclusion about the nature of the attainment of cessation, it would seem worthwhile to check with living members of this tradition to see if it corresponds to their own contemplative goals. Although Griffiths does indeed take the meaning of these scholastic texts seriously, he displays no comparable respect for the experiences of living Buddhist contemplatives. Thus, while he seeks to distance himself from the condescending perspective of some of the early Western pioneers of Buddhology, such as Louis de La Vallée Poussin,[24] the distance may not be as great as he desires.

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[22]Cf. Philip C. Almond, *The British Discovery of Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

[23]Paul J. Griffiths, *On Being Mindless: Buddhist Meditation And The Mind-Body Problem*, p. 11.

[24]Griffiths specifically rejects Poussin's judgment of Indian "'philosophumena' as being concocted by ascetic...men exhausted by a severe diet and often stupefied by the practice of

Regarding the general topic of the relationship between quiescence and insight practices in Indian Buddhism, Griffiths sees this as "an excellent example of the uneasy bringing together of two radically different sets of soteriological methods and two radically different soteriological goals."[25] If one sets aside for the moment the lofty (or simply vegetative?) attainment of cessation and focuses on the basic training in quiescence presented by Tsongkhapa, it should be swiftly apparent that this discipline is a reasonable preparation for the cultivation of contemplative insight. Indo-Tibetan Buddhism regards the ordinary, untrained mind as "dysfunctional"[26] insofar as it is dominated by alternating states of laxity[27], lethargy and drowsiness on the one hand and excitation [28] and attentional scattering on the other. The cultivation of quiescence is designed to counteract these hindrances and cultivate the qualities of attentional stability and clarity, which are then applied to the training in insight. Thus, the assertion that quiescence is incompatible with insight at this early stage is tantamount to arguing that a mind dominated by laxity and excitation is more suitable for the cultivation of insight than is a mind imbued with attentional stability and clarity.

In her essay "Mental Concentration and the Unconditioned: A Buddhist Case for Unmediated Experience," Anne Klein, drawing from more than twenty years of close collaboration with Tibetan Buddhist contemplatives and scholars, discusses the stages of Buddhist meditation from a Gelugpa Madhyamaka perspective. There she asserts that at some early stages of the path to

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ecstasy." [Louis de La Vallée Poussin, The way to *Nirvāṇa : Six Lectures on Ancient Buddhism as a Discipline of Salvation*. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1917) pp. 110-112]; Paul J. Griffiths, *On Being Mindless: Buddhist Meditation And The Mind-Body Problem*, p. xiii. See also Paul Griffiths, "Buddhist Hybrid English: Some Notes on Philology and Hermeneutics for Buddhologists". *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 4 (1981) pp. 17-32.

[25] Paul J. Griffiths , *On Being Mindless: Buddhist Meditation And The Mind-Body Problem,* p. 23. A far more insightful discussion of the relationship between quiescence and insight in Theravāda Buddhist practice is found in Winston L. King's *Theravāda Meditation: The Buddhist Transformation of Yoga* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1980) pp. 108-115.

[26] gnas ngan len, dauṣṭulya

[27] bying ba, laya

[28] rgod pa, auddhatya

enlightenment, concentration and insight are indeed antithetical; but in the more advanced stages the relationship between them becomes "complementary—meaning that the increase of one fits with and engenders development in the other."[29] At least implicitly in response to Griffiths's characterization of the attainment of cessation as a state of complete mindlessness, Klein comments, "...it is only those who do not understand the extent of calm or the full potential of the internally engendered energy associated with consciousness who are susceptible to misinterpreting the cessation of coarse minds as cessation of consciousness."[30]

It may be that the Theravāda, Vaibhāṣika, and Yogācāra traditions, which Griffiths analyzes, simply disagree with the Madhyamaka interpretation of the attainment of cessation. Or it may be that by focusing on scholastic accounts of meditation and ignoring the fact that the Buddhist contemplative tradition has ever been a living tradition, Griffiths, for all his impressive erudition and philosophical acumen, has produced a fundamentally misleading interpretation of the attainment of cessation and the relationship between quiescence and insight?[31] An increasing number of Buddhologists are coming to recognize the shortcomings of ignoring the contemporary Buddhist tradition. For example, J. W. de Jong, a highly respected scholar of philology and textual criticism, writes, "The most important task for the student of Buddhism today is the study of the

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[29]Anne C. Klein, "Mental Concentration and the Unconditioned: A Buddhist Case for Unmediated Experience" in Robert E. Buswell, Jr. & Robert M. Gimello, ed. *Paths to Liberation: The Mārga and Its Transformations in Buddhist Thought* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1992) (Studies in East Asian Buddhism 7) p. 281.

[30]Ibid. 290.

[31]When trying to assess contemplative experiences that are said to be beyond the scope of the intellect, it is well to bear in mind Nāgārjuna's injunction: "What words can express comes to a stop when the domain of the mind comes to a stop." ("*nivṛttam abhidhātavyaṃ nivṛtte cittagocare*," *Mūlamadhyama-kakārikā* 18.7a). Cited in Frits Staal, *Exploring Mysticism: A Methodological Essay* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1975) p. 45.

Buddhist mentality. That is why contact with present-day Buddhism is so important..."[32]

Since 1959, when over 100,000 Tibetans fled from their homeland, which had been brutally occupied since 1950 by the Chinese communists, an increasing number of Tibetan Buddhist scholars and contemplatives have visited and taught in the West; and many from the Gelugpa order have expounded on the cultivation of quiescence. Geshe Sopa, for instance offers a cursory overview of this discipline in his essay "*Śamathavipaśyanāyuganaddha*: The Two Leading Principles of Buddhist Meditation."[33] Lati Rinpoche gives a similar, somewhat more extensive account in the discussion of "Calm Abiding" in *Meditative States in Tibetan Buddhism: The Concentrations and Formless Absorptions*.[34] And Geshe Gedün Lodrö gives an even more detailed, highly erudite account in *Walking Through Walls: A Presentation of Tibetan Meditation*,[35] in which he demonstrates his extensive knowledge not only of early Indian Buddhist literature, but later Gelugpa scholasticism as well. Jeffrey Hopkins, whom we have to thank for the above two volumes, has also given his own presentation of the development of quiescence in the "Calm Abiding" chapter of his *Meditation on Emptiness*; and his discussion is of precisely the same genre as the above mentioned texts.[36]

All these presentations by erudite Tibetan scholars of Buddhism pattern themselves closely after Tsongkhapa's discussions of this topic in his two major expositions of the stages of the path to enlightenment;[37] and all of them are

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[32] J. W. de Jong (1974) "The study of Buddhism: problems and perspectives." *Studies in Indo-Asian Art and Culture* 4 (*Vira Commemorative Volume*) p. 26.

[33] Included in the volume *Mahāyāna Buddhist Meditation: Theory and Practice*, Minoru Kiyota, ed. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1978) pp. 46-65.

[34] Lati and Lochö Rinbochays, L. Zahler, and J. Hopkins, *Meditative States in Tibetan Buddhism: The Concentrations and Formless Absorptions*. (London: Wisdom Publications, 1983) pp. 52-91.

[35] Geshe Gedün Lodrö, *Walking Through Walls: A Presentation of Tibetan Meditation*. trans. & ed. Jeffrey Hopkins (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1992).

[36] Jeffrey Hopkins, *Meditation on Emptiness* (London: Wisdom Publications, 1983) pp. 67-90.

[37] *Byang chub lam rim che ba*. (Collected Works, Vol. Pa) & *Byang chub lam gyi rim pa chung ba*. (Collected Works, Vol. Pha).

delivered within the context of Western academia. It seems safe to assume that all the above Tibetan scholars—trained in the Tibetan monastic tradition and not in "Buddhist Studies" in the Western academic tradition—take seriously both the texts on quiescence as well as the experiential accounts of the development and attainment of quiescence. Huntington characterizes this traditional approach to Buddhist literature as "proselytic," and he disparages this methodology as constituting a violation of the very texts that are studied.[38] In light of the fact that Buddhists have been transmitting knowledge of their tradition in this manner for more than two millennia, it seems somewhat harsh to judge them all as violating the very texts they hold sacred. And Huntington's approach of refusing to look in such texts for any truth valid and intelligible for ourselves seems an unpromising alternative.

The chief limitation in the previously mentioned Tibetan scholars' methodology is that while they take Buddhist texts and contemplative experience seriously, in presenting this material they do not apparently take into account the cultural backgrounds of their audience. It is as if their lectures on Buddhism are sent to us in envelopes marked "Occupant," anonymously directed to whatever audience might receive them, regardless of time or place. With no regard for modern Western views concerning the mind, attention, the role of consciousness in the universe, or any of the natural sciences, these Tibetan teachers describe the nature of quiescence and the means of achieving paranormal abilities and extrasensory perception. The vast chasm between their assertions, which they present as uncontested facts, and the prevailing Western views on these subjects is never even acknowledged. Thus, while Western Buddhologists commonly fail to take Buddhist literature and experience seriously, Tibetan teachers commonly fail to take the Western world view

[38]C. W. Huntington, *The Emptiness of Emptiness: An Introduction to Early Indian Mādhyamika*, p. 8.

seriously. Allowance for this oversight must be made for senior Tibetan scholars and contemplatives who visit the West with little or no knowledge of Western languages and culture. But it is to be hoped that younger generations of Tibetans and Western scholars who adopt their approach will take on the difficult challenge of bringing the Buddhist tradition into meaningful, informed dialogue with the modern West.

All the above treatments of quiescence are presented within the context of the modern Western academic world. But Buddhism is also being taught in Buddhist "Dharma centers" and monasteries around the world; and here the emphasis is on seeking not only theoretical understanding but personal experience. It was in this context, in a Buddhist monastery in Switzerland, that the late, distinguished Tibetan Buddhist scholar and contemplative Geshe Rabten taught quiescence to a group of Westerner monks and lay students in his lectures published in the book *Echoes of Voidness*.[39] Likewise, after living as a Buddhist contemplative recluse in the Himalayas for roughly twenty years, the Tibetan monk Gen Lamrimpa delivered a series of lectures on the cultivation of quiescence to a group of Western students as they were about to begin a one-year contemplative retreat under his guidance in the United States. These lectures, which appeared as his book *Śamatha Meditation*,[40] were followed by his individual guidance to each of those in retreat as they applied themselves to this training over the next year. Among the range of treatments of quiescence cited above, this approach may be deemed the least scientific with respect to Buddhist literature, but the most scientific with respect to Buddhist meditative experience; for the participants in this project actually put the Buddhist theories concerning

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[39]Geshe Rabten, *Echoes of Voidness*, Stephen Batchelor, trans. & ed. (London: Wisdom Publications, 1986) pp. 113-128.

[40]Gen Lamrimpa, *Śamatha Meditation*. B. Alan Wallace, trans. (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1992).

attentional development to the test of experience.[41] The working hypothesis for this project was that not only philosophy, but meditation is, to use Griffiths words, "a trans-cultural human activity, which in all essentials operates within the same conventions and by the same norms in all cultures."[42]

Buddhology and the Modern World

For all the variety of discussions of quiescence in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism by Western and Tibetan scholars alike, their impact on modern philosophical and scientific understanding of attention, introspection, and consciousness remains negligible. For example, more than a century ago, William James, founder of the first psychology laboratory in the United States, concluded on the basis of the best available scientific research that voluntary attention cannot be sustained for more than a few seconds at a time.[43] The last fifty years of scientific research on attention have relied primarily on measures of performance, that is, on the effects of attention on some type of behavior. Following this approach, the quality and duration of attention can be inferred only indirectly from behavior. This method is particularly problematic when it comes to assessing scientifically the kind of

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[41]When Herbert Benson, a Harvard physician with an interest in meditation, offered to conduct objective scientific research on the participants in this one-year retreat, Gen Lamrimpa respectfully declined on the grounds that such research might interfere with the meditators' own training. He proposed instead that such research be conducted during some comparable future retreat; then by comparing the two, one might ascertain the extent of interference experienced due to such scientific research.

[42]Gen Lamrimpa commented to me at the end of this year that before he began leading this retreat, he had little hope that these Western students would be able to progress significantly in this training; but after collaborating with them over the course of the year, he was impressed at the progress many of them had made. At the conclusion of this project, the majority of the participants told me that , for all its difficulties and challenges, this had been the most meaningful year of their life.

[43]William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (New York: Dover Publications, 1950) I:420.

attention developed in the training in quiescence, which is not directly linked to behavior.

Gregory Simpson, a contemporary neuroscientist who has specialized in the study of attention, comments that it may be accurate to say that the effects of the highest levels of attention on outwardly manifested performance are not typically sustained for more than one to three seconds.[44] Although focused attention may be enhanced for only one to three seconds without additional stimuli or other external assistance, relatively high levels of attention may be sustained for many tens of minutes.[45] Due to the lack of engagement between scientists and Buddhist contemplatives, it is not clear whether the kind of attention cultivated in the training in quiescence is of the "highest level," which, according to scientific research can be maintained for only a few seconds, or whether it is the kind that can commonly be sustained for much longer periods. What can be said is that experiments that have measured transient, focused attention on the basis of the performance of simple sensory tasks indicate that this transient, high level of focused attention lasts between one and three seconds,[46] which agrees with James' claim more than a century ago.

James also assumed that one's attentional faculties cannot be significantly refined by any type of discipline. Rather, the degree of one's attentional stability is most likely a fixed characteristic of the individual.[47] Since he made this claim,

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[44]Personal correspondence, June 4, 1995.

[45]Cf. N. H. Mackworth, Medical Research Council Special Report no. 268, (London: H.M. Stationary Office, 1950); J. F. Mackworth, *Vigilance and Attention*, (Penguin Books, 1970); and A. F. Sanders, (Ed.) *Attention and Performance I*, (Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Co., 1970).

[46]M. I. Posner, *Chronometric Exploration of Mind* (Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1978).

[47]William James, *Talks to Teachers: On Psychology; and to students on some of Life's Ideals* , Intro. by Paul Woodring (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1899/1958) p. 84. James also claims, "*There can be no improvement of the general or elementary faculty of memory: there can only be improvement of our memory for special systems of associated things*; and this latter improvement is due to the way in which the things in question are woven into association with each other in the mind." (Ibid., pp. 90-91.) In light of the fact that the same term, *smṛti*, is used in Buddhism for both mindfulness and memory, it would also be interesting to determine scientifically whether Buddhist techniques for developing *smṛti* do in fact enhance either mindfulness or memory.

very little scientific research has been conducted to test this theory, and the present attitude among cognitive scientists remains very close to James'. In contrast, a central claim of all Indo-Buddhist discussions of quiescence is that with training the attention can be voluntarily sustained for many hours in succession, without the slightest interference by laxity or excitation. These discussions also assert that one's introspective faculties can also be enhanced to a high degree, resulting in exceptional states of cognitive and emotional balance. If there is any truth to the Buddhist claims concerning these issues, they have not been demonstrated to scientists who study the nature, functioning, and potentials of human attention, introspection, or consciousness.

This situation is typical of the relationship between the academic study of Buddhism and the rest of the academic and scientific world. Huntington rightly points out that this insularity of the academic field of Buddhology "is supposed to preserve the integrity of the discipline as a legitimate, autonomous *Fach*, but by now it has become clear that both the concept of an isolated discipline and the techniques used to define it (the guarantors of purity) are no longer necessary or desirable."[48] A great strength of the natural sciences is their cross-fertilization from one discipline to another, but the study of religion and the study of science are separated by a vast chasm of silence, each one insulated from the other, apparently by mutual consent.

A remedy for this dysfunctional relationship was long ago proposed by William James, who was trained as a scientist and also wrote major works in the fields of philosophy and religious studies. James was a premier example of a man of science who refused to adhere to the articles of faith of scientific naturalism, and a deeply religious man who rejected religious dogma.[49] His

[48]C. W. Huntington, *The Emptiness of Emptiness: An Introduction to Early Indian Mādhyamika*, p. 5.
[49]Cf. Bennett Ramsey , *Submitting to Freedom* (New York : Oxford University Press, 1993). Throughout this work, I am using the term "scientific naturalism" to denote a creed that

approach was to take a genuinely scientific interest in the precise, open-minded investigation of the entire range of human experience, including religious experience.[50]

James proposed a science of religion that would differ from philosophical theology by drawing inferences and devising imperatives based on a scrutiny of "the immediate content of religious consciousness."[51] He envisioned this as an empirical, rather than a scholastic, rationalistic approach, that was to focus on religious experience rather than religious doctrines and institutions. He elaborates on this point:

> Let empiricism once become associated with religion, as hitherto, through some strange misunderstanding, it has been associated with irreligion, and I believe that a new era of religion as well as philosophy will be ready to begin. ... I fully believe that such an empiricism is a more natural ally than dialectics ever were, or can be, of the religious life.[52]

Such a science of religions, he suggests, "can offer mediation between different believers, and help to bring about consensus of opinion"[53]; and he pondered

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identifies itself with natural science and that adheres to the metaphysical principles of physicalism, reductionism, and the closure principle (the assertion that there are no causal influences on physical events besides other physical events). Natural science, in contrast, is a body of knowledge acquired by means of empirical testing of hypotheses through observation and experiment, and as such, it is not inextricably tied with any one metaphysical belief system.

[50]Cf. Henry Samuel Levinson, *The Religious Investigations of William James* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981).

[51]William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Penguin Books, 1902/1982) p. 12.

[52]William James, *A Pluralistic Universe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1909/1977) p. 142; Cf. William James, "Pluralism and Religion, *Hibbert Journal*, (1908) 6, pp. 721-728.

[53]William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, p. 456.

whether such a science might even command public adherence comparable to that presently granted to the physical sciences.[54]

With a return to empiricism as opposed to dogmatic religious and scientific rationalism, James' perspective on the future interface between science and religion was optimistic:

> Evidently, then, the science and the religion are both of them genuine keys for unlocking the world's treasure-house to him who can use either of them practically. Just as evidently neither is exhaustive or conclusive of the other's simultaneous use.[55]

James' proposal for an empirically scientific study of religion has itself been a subject of academic study, but it has hardly been adopted as a methodology in the field of religious studies. One scholar who has challenged this trend is the Indologist Frits Staal. In his book *Exploring Mysticism: A Methodological Essay* he declares that the study of the phenomenology and history of religion is always unsatisfactory and insufficient because it does not investigate the validity of the phenomena it studies, and often wrong because of incorrect implicit evaluation.[56] Staal proposes two parts to the scientific study of mysticism: the study of mystical experiences and their validity, and the study of the interpretations mystics and others have offered to account for these experiences. A rational, theoretical and experimental approach to mysticism is necessary, he says, if mysticism is ever to become a serious subject of investigation.

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[54]Ibid.

[55]Ibid., pp. 122-3.

[56]Frits Staal, *Exploring Mysticism: A Methodological Essay* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1975) p. 92.

It is Staal's interest in mystical experience that draws him to the study of meditation, which, he says, stands most in need of experiential, or subjective, study. While various meditative experiences certainly may be deemed mystical in nature, one disadvantage of classifying meditation as mystical practice is that one thereby tends to ignore aspects of meditative experience that are not mystical. For example, the entire Buddhist training in quiescence consists of theories and practices concerning the nature of attention, introspection, and consciousness; and none of these phenomena are intrinsically mystical. Such practice may be deemed "pre-mystical," and yet it forms a crucial element of Indo-Tibetan Buddhist meditation.

Perhaps due to this too narrow assessment of meditation, Staal dismisses physiological research into this subject as providing insignificant results about unexplained, physical side effects, without detecting the effects of meditation on the mind.[57] At present, the psychological study of mysticism, he says, is in an even more unsatisfactory state than its physiological study; but he regards the outlook for the future as very promising. While Staal is probably right in his evaluation of physiological research into mystical experience, it may, nevertheless, yield significant insights into the psycho-physiological transformations that take place during the more basic, non-mystical training in quiescence. Yet even here, he is right in asserting that the methodologies of cognitive psychology are likely to provide a clearer evaluation of such meditation practice.

In proposing his methodology for studying meditation scientifically, Staal draws a strict distinction between (1) followers of a *guru*, adherents of a particular sect, or people in search of *nirvāna, mokṣa,* or salvation and (2) genuine students of mysticism: "While both have to share certain attitudes, the student

[57]Ibid., p. 110.

has sooner or later to resume a critical outlook so that he can obtain understanding and make it available to others."[58] The uncharitable, and not entirely justified, assumption underlying this distinction is that religious people who practice meditation are incapable of resuming (or ever adopting) a critical outlook on such practice and are therefore incapable of obtaining understanding and making it available to others. The student of meditation, he proposes, can learn the necessary techniques of meditation only by initially accepting them uncritically. However, once those methods have been learned, the critical student must "be prepared to question and check what the teacher says, and introduce new variables and experimental variation."[59] With keen insight, he points out:

> The doubts which we entertain with respect to very unfamiliar events are largely the outcome of prejudices shaped by our experiences with more familiar events. Too much doubt at the outset will accordingly hold us back and prevent us from entering a new domain. Therefore we should suspend doubt if we wish to learn something new. But if we do not resort to analysis and critical evaluation at a later stage, we move into the new domain like sleep-walkers, without gaining any knowledge or understanding.[60]

What he fails to note, however, is that a similar view is advocated in traditional Buddhist discussions of religious practice as a whole,[61] and it may well be that

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[58]Ibid., p. 130.
[59]Ibid., p. 146.
[60]Ibid., p. 134.
[61]See the discussion of these three phases of practice in the following discussion of Tsongkhapa's methodology.

this approach is encouraged in other contemplative traditions as well. Although the *types* of critical analysis of the practice applied to the practice may differ between aspiring mystics and students of mysticism, it is certainly unfair to characterize the former as sleep-walkers devoid of knowledge or understanding.

Staal claims that it is the task of students of mysticism, rather than mystics, to evolve the best theories about mysticism[62]; and it is the former who must explore whether the latter have actually attained the goals they think they have.[63] Such claims may be nothing more than an expression of his bias against religious mysticism, for one of the expressed aims of his book is to show that mysticism need not necessarily be regarded as a part of religion.

While Staal provides in the first part of his book excellent critiques of earlier comparative studies of mysticism, showing how they fail due to their dogmatic biases, the methodology he proposes seems to fall under the same sword. The dogma that underlies his approach is one that is dismissive of the relevance of religion, philosophy, and ethics to mystical experience. It is the task of his idealized student of mysticism to distinguish between "valid instruction into a practice, such as meditation, which cannot be learned in any other way, and the religious or philosophical superstructure which is added and which is often meaningless if not worthless."[64] Moreover, he cautions that many of the required or recommended methods are likely to be irrelevant, "because they are religious or moral paraphernalia."[65] Staal asserts his dogmatic bias most distinctly when he says of such "superstructure" that since "they generally involve religious or philosophical considerations, differences between them need

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[62]Ibid., p. 63.
[63]Ibid., p. 148.
[64]Ibid., p. 147.
[65]Ibid., p. 135.

not reflect differences in mystical experience."[66] Thus, he declares, "a good teacher will emphasize practice, a bad teacher will expound theories."[67]

The simple truth that is ignored in this dogma is one that Griffiths rightly identifies: while the results of meditative practice influence philosophical and religious theories, it is also true that "philosophical beliefs shape meditative techniques, provide specific expectations, and thus have a formative influence on the kinds of experience which are actually produced..."[68]

The root of Staal's aversion to religion may be traced to his perception of institutionalized religions as being chiefly concerned not with the religious or mystical experience of individuals, but "with society, ethics, morality, and the continuation of the *status quo*."[69] This fundamental sympathy with mystical experience, coupled with antipathy towards the religious and philosophical theories about mysticism, is an attitude shared with William James. James comments that in writing his *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, he had two aims: first, to defend "experience" against "philosophy" as being the real backbone of the world's religious life, and second, "to make the hearer or reader believe, what I myself do invincibly believe, that, although all the special manifestations of religion may have been absurd (I mean its creeds and theories), yet the life of it as a whole is mankind's most important function."[70] Staal and James seem to differ, however, in that James places a high value on the religious practices of ethics, prayer, worship, and so on, whereas Staal apparently dismisses these as aspects of the useless superstructure around mysticism.

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[66]Ibid., p. 173.
[67]Ibid., p. 149.
[68]Paul J. Griffiths, *On Being Mindless: Buddhist Meditation And The Mind-Body Problem*, p. xiv.
[69]Frits Staal, *Exploring Mysticism: A Methodological Essay*, p. 165.
[70]*The Letters of William James* , ed. by Henry James, Jr., (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1920) Vol. II, p. 127. Cf. "[Experience and Religion: A Comment]" in *The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition*, John J. McDermott, ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1977) pp. 740-741.

The opposition that Staal sets up between traditional meditators and modern students of mysticism raises fundamental questions concerning the degree of difference that separates the religious from the scientific mentality. Although this is far too vast a topic to treat adequately in the present context, it may be worthwhile, before bringing this discussion to a close, to note James' perspective on this matter. In his provocative essay entitled "Faith and the Right to Believe,"[71] James challenges what he calls "intellectualism," defined as "the belief that our mind comes upon a world complete in itself, and has the duty of ascertaining its contents; but has no power of re-determining its character, for that is already given." He identifies two kinds of intellectualists: rational intellectualists who "lay stress on deductive and 'dialectic' arguments, making large use of abstract concepts and pure logic (Hegel, Bradley, Taylor, Royce); and empiricist intellectualists who "are more 'scientific,' and think that the character of the world must be sought in our sensible experiences, and found in hypotheses based exclusively thereon (Clifford, Pearson)."[72] In this light, Staal's student of mysticism seems to bear all the earmarks of an empiricist intellectualist, while more traditional Buddhologists, such as Griffiths, appear to be rational intellectualists.

Intellectualism, James says, asserts that knowledge of the pre-given universe "is best gained by a passively receptive mind, with no native sense of probability, or good-will towards any special result."[73] Moreover, it assumes that "our beliefs and our acts based thereupon...[are] such mere externalities as

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[71]William James, "Faith and the Right to Believe," in *Some Problems of Philosophy* (New York: Longman's, Green and Co., 1948 (1911). Posthumous, ed. by Henry James, Jr. pp. 221-131. Also in *The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition*, John J. McDermott, ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1977) pp. 735-740.

[72]Ibid., p. 735. In this essay James is specifically targeting the views of William K. Clifford expressed in the essay "The Ethics of Belief" in *Lectures and Essays* (1879); Cf. William Kingdom Clifford, *Lectures and Essays by the Late William Kingdom Clifford, F. R. S* (London: Macmillan, 1901).

[73]Ibid., p. 736.

not to alter in any way the significance of the rest of the world when they are added to it."[74] Here is the classic "disinterested" perspective that is widely deemed necessary on the part of all scientific researchers, whether they are examining texts or experience. James acknowledges that the postulates of intellectualism work well as long as the issues under investigation are of no pressing importance and that by believing nothing, we can escape error while we wait. It is a different matter, however, when the subject is of pressing importance. In such cases, he writes,

> ...we often cannot wait but must act, somehow; so we act on the most *probable* hypothesis, trusting that the event prove us wise. Moreover, not to act on one belief, is often equivalent to acting as if the opposite belief were true, so inaction would not always be as "passive" as the intellectualists assume. It is one attitude of will.[75]

Philosophy and religion address issues that many regard as urgently important, and for these, he suggests, the intellectualist postulates may not obtain. As an expression of his pluralistic philosophy, James proposes,

> The character of the world's results may in part depend upon our acts. Our acts may depend on our religion,—on our not-resisting our faith-tendencies, or on our sustaining them in spite of "evidence" being incomplete. These faith-tendencies in turn are but expressions of our good-will towards certain forms of result.[76]

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[74]Ibid.
[75]Ibid.
[76]Ibid.

From this perspective, intellectualists' condemnation of religious faith is itself nothing more than an act of faith in the intellectualists' theory of the constitution of the universe.

In terms of James' distinction between intellectualism and pluralism, it is evident that advocates of religion as well as advocates of science may be either intellectualists or pluralists. Likewise, while one adheres to articles of a religious creed, the other may just as tenaciously adhere to the metaphysical principles of scientific naturalism. James acknowledges faith as one of the inalienable birthrights of our minds, but he cautions,

> Of course it must remain practical, and not a dogmatic attitude. It must go with toleration of other faiths, with the search for the most probable, and with the full consciousness of responsibilities and risks.
>
> It may be regarded as a formative factor in the universe, if we be integral parts thereof, and co-determinants, by our behavior, of what its total character may be.[77]

All of us are presently endowed with consciousness, but for most of us, at least, the origins, nature, causal efficacy, and fate of this phenomenon, so central to our very existence, remain a mystery. Is it possible to explore these features of consciousness by means of introspection? If so, is it possible to enhance our attentional and introspection faculties so that such research may provide reliable and incisive results? Given the centrality of consciousness to our whole existence, and given the brief and uncertain span of human life, the fundamental

[77]Ibid., p. 737.

questions about consciousness may well be regarded as ones of pressing importance.

The following work, then, is written for those who share this sense of the importance and urgency of discovering the nature and potentials of consciousness. They may include Western philosophers and cognitive scientists concerned with attention, introspection, and consciousness, historians of religion interested in the connections between quiescence and analogous techniques taught and practiced in other traditions, professional Buddhologists, and practicing contemplatives interested in implementing Tsongkhapa’s instructions on the cultivation of quiescence. Finally, I hope that this work may encourage the growth of the community of scientists and contemplatives willing to join their efforts in probing the nature of consciousness by drawing on and integrating the methods and wisdom of the East and the West, the ancient and the modern.